

## The Women Leaders of Birbhum: Revisiting the 1942 Open Rebellion

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**Abstract :** *Like the other sections of the society, women also spontaneously participated in the Quit India Movement in Birbhum. Along with their male counterparts, they were also able to mobilize the common people. To subjugate the motherland, they discarded their own private space and provided leadership to the anti-British actions. Mainly Shantiniketan and its adjacent areas became the ground of their nationalist activities. In spite of being imprisoned, many of them continued their nationalist activities. To make the movement more intense in Birbhum, a number of women leaders carried radical programmes. Due to their effort, the movement turned into counter-resistance in spite of British atrocities.*

**Keywords:** Quit India Movement, Birbhum District, Women Leaders, Jenana Fatak, Marginalized people, Mobilization.

In the history of the Indian national movement, some anti-British movements acquired a new dimension from the point of view of its spontaneity and intensity. Here lies the importance of the Quit India Movement in 1942 which has often been regarded as Open Rebellion.<sup>1</sup> Almost all sections of people spontaneously participated in that movement especially when all the front-ranking Congress leaders were behind the bars. And from that point of view, women's participation in Quit India Movement acquired a new dimension. We must remember that due to the reform movements in various sectors throughout nineteenth-century India, the women folk gradually became politically conscious also. We find the reflection of such consciousness in the Swadeshi movement, Non-Cooperation movement, Civil Disobedience movement, various regional disturbances and most importantly in revolutionary activities. It must be said that in most cases, women mainly drifted towards radical disturbances. However, their leadership and sacrifice for the motherland have been admired and recognized by contemporary nationalist leaders. For instance, Gandhi himself praised the heroic activities of Indian women in nationalist struggle and commented in *Young India* that:...yours is the purest sacrifice untainted by anger or hate. Let me confess to you that your spontaneous and loving response all over India has convinced me that God is with us. No other proof

of our struggle is one of self-purification is needed than the lakhs of Indian women are actively helping it.<sup>2</sup>

During Quit India Movement, throughout the country, a number of women leaders spontaneously participated in radical anti-British actions. Moreover, by this time, women were members and sometimes even leaders of student associations, peasant movements and labour unions.<sup>3</sup> Bengal was also not exceptional from the above trends. Bengal was one of the storm centres of the movement. At the beginning of the movement, the epicenter of disturbances in Bengal was urban areas. But towards the close of 1942, the movement drifted towards the rural countryside of Bengal. Regarding this, one contemporary researcher commented that 'at the initial period, the movement in Bengal was urban in character and Calcutta in West Bengal and Dacca in East Bengal were the main storm centres. Subsequently, the movement increasingly assumed the complexion of rural mass rebellion in some areas like Birbhum and Midnapore.'<sup>4</sup>

Along with the district-level male leaders, women also played an important role to mobilize the people. It is important to know that Bengali women played multiple roles in anti-British actions in 1942. Apart from proving the leadership, they also contributed by providing shelter and food to revolutionaries. They allowed their homes as the venue for secret meetings. Despite barbaric and inhuman British atrocities, they showed their bravery and courage in this intense mass movement and thus they were able to keep their revolutionary spirit in 1942. In this scenario, it must be remembered that all such anti-British activities by women were appeared not only in Midnapore but in another district of Bengal also. Birbhum, the district that belonged to rarh region of Bengal is one of them.

The district saw the application of a number of distinctive techniques in the organization of the movement. Processions, meetings, picketing, non-payment of taxes and rents, traveling by trains without a ticket,<sup>5</sup> attacking rail stations, looting of paddy from rich landlords, etc. occurred in this district. In many of such programmes, the women leaders of Birbhum were deeply involved. Indeed, with the spread of the movement, the large number of women in Birbhum joined men in protesting against British atrocities, taxes, land tenure and land holder's rights. The social composition of such womenfolk was also different. They belonged to common housewives, the teaching profession and revolutionary groups. What inspired them was the urge to free the subjugated motherland. In this struggle, they had to tolerate inhuman atrocities, discard their families and many of them were forced to spend their remaining life in the darkest prisoner cell. Birbhum is the land of its heroic children. So this paper will focus on concise deliberation of anti-British actions by women leaders in Birbhum. At the same time, how their engagement in the disturbances of 1942 provided a new dimension to the Quit India Movement in Bengal will also get highlighted.

### **Women in Political mobilization**

So far as mobilization is concerned, it is the most essential process for any successful uprisings or movements in all the time and country. This process involves the common people of the society i.e. peasants, workers, etc under one single banner to conduct a movement. In the history of the anti-colonial movements in India, mobilization played an important role. Though, the process of mobilization widely varied. In the case of the Quit India Movement in 1942, almost every section of society participated spontaneously due to effective mobilization. And it must be remembered that along with local male leaders a number of women actively took part in the process of mobilization. They provided shelters, and food to the revolutionaries arranged space for secret meetings, sang patriotic songs, tolerated inhuman British atrocities and most importantly struggled against British side-by-side men leaders. In this respect, the women of Midnapore showed their bravery and heroism. Matangini Hazra, Susmita Bera, Charusila Jana, Giribala Dey, Makhnabala Das and so many other women played important roles in revolutionary activities in 1942.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, their heroic struggle effectively mobilized the common people.

During the Quit India Movement, the Birbhum district of Bengal also witnessed the application of effective mobilization under the women leaders. A number of women discarded their household and professional lives and provided leadership to the movement of 1942. It must be remembered that at that time also Birbhum was famous for Santiniketan, the land of creations by Rabindranath Tagore. It was confirmed by a secret report that the younger section of the teaching staff and all the adult students, both boys and girls of Santiniketan had joined the movement.<sup>7</sup>

### **Rani Chanda and the Quit India Movement in Birbhum**

In 1942, Mrs. Rani Chanda,<sup>8</sup> the most prominent women leader belonged to Santiniketan. She was able to mobilize the students of Santiniketan and organized the anti-British activities in the adjacent villages with the help of some nationalists. In the government report also, it was revealed that: They formed a batch and started for Laldaha to carry on anti-British propaganda in the rural area with Laldaha as the centre of activities. The batch was subsequently strengthened by a few workers headed by Mrs. Nandita Kripalini, wife of professor Krishna Kripalini.<sup>9</sup>

During those days, the Communists-led Provincial Kisan Sabha provided leadership to the peasant agitations in demands of adhar rights and against hoarders and black marketeers and formed broad-based food committees. In Jajigram, Paikar, Murarai, Sainthia, Dubrajpur, Rampurhat, Nanoor, Fatepur, Suri, Ghuskara and Ruppur of Birbhum district, a large number of peasants joined in no-revenue and no-rent campaigns.<sup>10</sup> Rani Chanda utilized these grievances and tried to mobilize the peasant community in the nearby

villages. For instance, towards the close of August 1942, Rani Chanda organized a meeting of about 400 persons at Adityapur, police station Bolpur and advocated non-payment of taxes and rents.<sup>11</sup> Rani Chanda declared that if the Indians could manage to drive out the English the Japanese would not resort to the bombing. On 7 September 1942, Rani Chanda while organizing a meeting at Paruldanga, police station Bolpur, was arrested. During the tenure of her imprisonment, she had to go through inhuman behavior and atrocities by the British authority towards the revolutionaries into jail custody. She also realized the actual nature of British imperialism. Later she wrote a book titled *Jenana Fatak* (Quarter for imprisoned women into the jail) where she expressed her experiences as a prisoner into jail custody. *Jenana Fatak*, indeed, is the record of daily life events of imprisoned women revolutionaries. On the one hand, the book revealed the facts which were surrounded Rani Chandra during her imprisoned life, and on the other hand, some anti-British activities by other women leaders also became visible. *Jenana Fatak* also provides a number of revolutionary activities by the imprisoned women leaders including Rani Chanda within the jail. One of such events took place on 26 January 1943 when Rani Chanda along with other imprisoned women revolutionaries celebrated Independence Day. Rani Chandra revealed the event in her book: It was decided that flag hoisting should be a must on Independence Day. It was necessary to make a national flag. Ela, an imprisoned woman revolutionary prepared the flag by stitching the three pieces of clothes of three colours i.e. white, yellow and green, collected by cutting the corner of someone's bedsheet, putting someone's towel (gamcha) into turmeric water and cutting the pieces of someone's green saree...On the morning of 26 January, Ela brought a bamboo stick used to tie the mosquito net upon the bed. The Yamuna, another imprisoned woman revolutionary hurriedly tied the flag with that bamboo stick and tied it with the higher branch of the tree. The programme ended with Vandemataram chanting.<sup>12</sup>

The women leaders also desired starvation and engaged themselves on spinning wheels into the jail custody as Gandhi also started starvation for 21 days from 10th February 1943.<sup>13</sup>

### **Marginalized People and Women Leaders in Birbhum**

Apart from Rani Chanda, a number of women leaders in Birbhum district also played an important role to mobilize the common people against the British. In this respect, the most notable among them was Nandita Kripalini, granddaughter of Rabindranath Tagore and many Shantiniketan students like Ela Dutta, Bhavani Sen, Shanti Dasgupta, Mamata Rao, Prabhasini Chakraborty etc. Out of Shantiniketan also, there were a number of women leaders who also took active initiatives to mobilize the people. The most important fact is that due to their effort the marginalized people especially the Santals and labourers spontaneously participated in the movement. It was

noticed that leaders like Maya Ghosh, Sandhya Rani Singh and some other students along with Congress agitators visited Muluti and Surichuwa (Santal Parganas) and led out a procession with the assistance of local leaders such as Dinesh Mukherjee and Saku Mukherjee of Muluti.<sup>14</sup> They tried to make the labourers refrain from work and thus, increase the intensity of the movement. They urged the labourers working in the construction of the Aerodrome to cease work.

The British started to apply the repressive policy including mass arrests. But it did not halt the motion of the movement. From mid-September onwards, the leaders of this district made their utmost effort to revive the movement. In this respect also, the credit goes to the women leaders of the district. They instigated the labourers of the mills, common people of the villagers and students against the British authority. In Bolpur, women leaders like Ela Dutta, Santi Das Gupta visited some rice mills in the locality and instigated the labourers of the mills to launch a strike if they were not paid higher wages. Thus, they were able to mobilize the working class through successful channelization of their grievances into anti-British actions.

In many cases, it was noticed that women leaders of Birbhum district adopted different techniques to mobilize the people. They used specific slogans and programme also. Regarding this, the most notable event took place on 15 August 1942 when Sandhya Rani Singh<sup>15</sup> along with others numbering about 20 came to Sainthia, coming down at each railway station uttering slogans such as 'Don't Obey British Laws', 'Travel without a ticket' etc. They urged the people to observe hartal also. It must be remembered that Sandhya Rani Singh maintained her responsibility to look after the accommodation and food supply to revolutionaries during the 1942 movement.

During the 1942 movement, Bengal witnessed the terrible famine in 1943 which has often been regarded as man-made famine.<sup>16</sup> The devastating impact of this famine felt on the common people of Bengal. As the intensity of the famine of 1943 influenced the Quit India Movement in Bengal very deeply, Bengali women played an important role. During the famine years, women were visible both as victims and activists. Starving women begged for food in public places and went door to door in the suburbs. They flocked to the red-light districts, doubling the number of women in Calcutta's brothels. On the other hand, on 17 March 1943, a procession of 5,000 women from Calcutta and in suburbs marched to the Legislative Assembly protesting against rising prices and demanding food. Hunger marches by women followed in Bankura, Pubna, Madaripur, Badarganj, Dinajpur and Chittagong. Kanak Mukherjee, the contemporary Communist leader in Bengal, in her article *Bharate Deshpremik Nari Andolan* talked about the role of women in defending the country. She said, in all the spheres of activities concerning the organisation of effective defense of the country e.g. campaign for food, growing more food, increasing production etc., women were taking their share and through these

efforts, the women's movement was progressing.<sup>17</sup> Birbhum was also not exceptional. For relief work and helping the poverty-stricken people, Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti (Self-Protection Organisation for Women) was established in 1943 and there was one branch of this organization in Birbhum also. To help the affected people of Birbhum, and to make the relief work faster along with to secure women's rights, women came to the forefront of the movements in several places of Birbhum like Suri, Rajnagar, Mollarpur, Bolpur, Rampurhat etc. Women like Satyabala Devi, Sarojini Devi, Bina Majumder, Parul Majumder, Shanti Ghosh, Usha Bhowmik, Jahanara Begum etc. played an important role.<sup>18</sup>

### **Counter Movement and the women leaders of Birbhum**

In Bengal, one of the important characteristics of the Quit India Movement was the accentuation in the intensity of the movement in spite of police atrocities. It was applicable in Birbhum district also. When the large-scale arrests were going on throughout the district, the leaders tried to stir up civil disobedience movement activities especially in the countryside. Members of the unofficial Congress such as Sumitra Nandan Singh of Surul, Sailaja Mitra of Ruppur, Khudiram Chowdhuri of Berugram and Bolpur, formed a committee of Council of Action and armed themselves with material for restarting the movement. But Sumitra Singh and Sailaja Mitra were arrested and gradually, the group was dismantled. Through the rest of October 1942, revival activities of the members of the unofficial Congress were expected, especially in connection with the observance of the Gandhi week, as a few Congress leaflets to commemorate the week by resorting to fresh acts of lawlessness and destruction were in circulation. Two incidents occurred—one at Bolpur and the other at Suri. At Bolpur, a few workers more or less connected with the All India Spinners' Association, formed a procession but their immediate arrests nipped further demonstrations in the bud. Though, from mid-October, the demonstrators adopted more radical ways. In this respect, female teachers like Maniprabha Mukhopadhyay, Usha Mahara, Labanyaprabha Mukhopadhyay, Niharika Majumder, etc. came forward to give leadership in the movement.<sup>19</sup> The girls' school at Rampurhat was closed at the initiative of Miss Maya Ghosh, the Head Mistress who and a few girl students and Congressites were able to bring out a number of students from the Rampurhat High English School as a result of picketing.<sup>20</sup>

### **Conclusion**

So it can be concluded that women leaders played an important role in the Quit India Movement in Birbhum. Their leadership provided a new dimension to the movement as they were able to successfully mobilize the people along with their male counterparts. It is now also clear that most of the women leaders of Birbhum were educated and politically conscious. On the one hand, they supported common people's grievances due to the lower

wages, higher amount of rent etc. and on the other hand, they were successful to raise the real nature of British imperialism before people. Thus, they channelized the grievances of common people into anti-British actions. What important feature of the movement under their leadership was that almost all of them discarded their comfort zone and were involved in revolutionary activities. In many cases, it was noticed that they were able to gain the support of student society. Another important thing was that though they were the followers of Congress ideology, in many cases they were involved in the radical programme. The intensity of the Quit India Movement in Birbhum reached its climax due to their active leadership. The frightened British government had kept the women leaders in jail custody. However, accounts of women leaders like Rani Chanda revealed the fact that they continued their nationalist activities within the jail custody also.

#### Notes and References

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4. Chatterjee, Pranab Kumar, 'Quit India Movement of 1942 and the Nature of Urban Response in Bengal', in Proceedings of Indian History Congress, Vol.43, 1982, P. 692
5. Programmes like travelling by trains without ticket were motivated from Bihar where in front of ticket counters of almost every station it was written that 'Travel is prohibited with tickets'. See Bhaduri, Satinath, Jagari, a Bengali novel, Prakash Bhavan, 15 Bankeem Chatterjee Street, Calcutta, 1352 BS., p. 154
6. Pal, Rina, Women of Midnapore in Indian Freedom Struggle, Ratna Prakashan, Calcutta, 1996, p. 200
7. Santiniketan students joined the movement, August 25, 1942, extract from C.I.O. Calcutta report no. C.B.I. dated 30.08.42, cited in Chopra, P.N. (ed.), Quit India Movement -British Secret Documents, Interprint, New Delhi, 1986, p. 97
8. Rani Chanda was famous disciple and student of Rabindranath Tagore. Her mother was Purnashashi Devi and father was Kula Chandra Dey who was a dear friend of Rabindranath. She unveiled her talent in music, dance and arts at Visva-Bharati. In course of time, she became a regular member of Tagore's dance drama recitals. Later she married to Anil Chanda, the Principal of Santiniketan College. In 1942, she played an important role to organize the movement in adjacent areas of Santiniketan.
9. District Officers' chronicles of events of disturbances, consequent upon the All-India Congress committees resolution of 8 August, 1942 and the

- arrest of Congress leaders thereafter, August, 1942 to middle of March, 1943, Alipur, Supdt., Govt. printing, 1943, National Library, Kolkata, p. 8
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  11. District Officers' chronicles of events of disturbances, op.cit., p.8
  12. Chanda, Sri Rani, *Jenana Fatak* (in Bengali), Calcutta, 1365 B.S., P. 114
  13. *Ibid.*, P. 123
  14. District Officers' chronicles of events of disturbances, op.cit., p.8
  15. Sandhya Rani Singh shifted to Jajigram of Birbhum with her family in 1928. After marriage, she was inspired by the nationalist activities of her husband Lal Behari Sing and joined Congress. She took active role in the Satyagraha Movement in 1941.
  16. Amartya Sen said that poverty took place not only due to the lack of food but inequality which built into mechanism for distribution of food. Sen opined that Bengal famine of 1943 was the result of an urban economic boom which raised the food prices but it did not increase the wages of the laborers. Besides, hoarding, lack of food supply due to military supply line also contributed to this famine. See Sen, Amartya, *Poverty and Famine: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*, OUP, USA, 1982, P. 74
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